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Spanish TV portrayal of terrorism during the 2008 campaign: an example of polarised pluralism?

Introduction

The thesis defended by Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini (Hallin, 2004) on different models of media systems in democratic societies has been widely accepted by the academic community, even enthusiastically. Essentially, the model describes three categories of communication model systems: a *democratic corporatist model*, characterised by high newspaper circulation, external pluralism especially in national press, neutral commercial press, strong professionalisation, institutionalised self-regulation and a strong state intervention but with protection for press freedom. This is a model that can be found especially in Central and North Europe. Second, a *liberal model* characterised by medium newspaper circulation, neutral commercial press; information-oriented journalism; internal pluralism, strong professionalisation, non-institutionalised self-regulation and market dominated. In this case, this model is most typical of North Atlantic countries. Finally, the *polarised pluralist model* is distinguished by low newspaper circulation, an elite politically oriented press, high political parallelism, external pluralism, commentary-oriented journalism, weaker professionalisation, instrumentalisation and strong state intervention. Here, the

European Mediterranean countries are the main representatives of this model.

Of course the model has its own bounds, being one limit its reach to western European democracies and its difficulty to being applied to other countries. Also, it can be pointed out that the Polarised Pluralist model involves negative normative implications (compared to the other two models) what would turn it into an inferior or less-well developed model.

In any case, the idea of polarised pluralism is an observation of countries who have far distance from right and left points of view. The characteristics of polarised pluralism as the closeness of the relationship between political actors and the media; the heavy focus of the media on political life; the elitist nature of journalism and a journalism addressed to political insiders; are easy to check in any research. In that regard some researchers have been able to demonstrate the theory for the Spanish case in different situations (González et al., 2010; Sampedro, Pérez, 2008 or Strömbäck, Luengo, 2008).

Here, we are going to present another research based on the model of polarised pluralism. In this case, we focus on a very important issue, terrorism, in a very specific context, a general election. Indeed, on March 7th, 2008, in the heat of the electoral campaign, the terrorist group *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* (ETA) assassinated, in the Guipuzcoan locality of Mondragón (Basque Country), the former socialist city councillor, Isaías Carrasco Miguel, just two days before the general election. The event gained such importance that the candidates of both main parties, Mariano Rajoy and Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, decided to suspend the acts of campaign, decision that joined most of the leaders of political parties represented in Parliament, who expressed their condemnation.

Isaías Carrasco had been elected councilman between 2003 and 2007 under the Socialist Party of the Basque Country (PSE-EE). He was also a member of the General Union of Workers (UGT) and, since then, did not hold any public office, and had rejected the possibility of bodyguard service.

From the first democratic elections in 1977, and with the exception of the electoral campaign of 2011, ETA attacks had been a constant factor in electoral campaigns in Spain, both in General and European or Regional elections. Until that moment, excluding the attacks on March 11th, 2004, perpetrated by Al-Qaeda, the last attack of ETA during an electoral campaign was 6 days before the Basque elections of 2001, when it murdered Manuel Giménez Abbot (Popular Party). In general campaigns, the last event took place in 1996 with the cases of Francisco Tomás and Valiente and Fernando Múgica. During the 1980s, the volume of terrorist activity of ETA during the eve of elections was much higher.

Probably due to its political impact, its drama and spectacle of the event in question, the bombing of Isaias Carrasco became the main news piece for several days in the home stretch of the 2008 campaign and to until the electoral day.

Method

The present article analyses comparatively both days of news coverage on this event offered by the main television channels¹ at night in their news programmes between the 20:00 and the 21:00 in March, 7th and 8th, which is considered *prime time*.

With the intention of studying the coverage of the attack, and based on a content analysis, we are presenting a series of variables that will serve as the axis of the analysis process: time, events, political assessments and disputes.

TIME: In this case, it is an initial approach to the importance given by each chain to the story itself. For obvious reasons, the extraordinary characteristics of the event treated here cause that the times used for the coverage by each channel was really generous, especially if we compare them with the habitual standards of the journalistic routine, where news of two minutes long are considered big news.

EVENTS: An informative piece so exceptional is constructed with several episodes through which television networks give form to the type of narrative selected. In this section we will pay attention to what those events were and how they were portrayed by each of the channels under study.

POLITICAL ASSESSMENTS: This type of news are exposed to a lot of reflections, interventions and evaluations of political character which can be particularly useful for analysing the different editorial lines of each media.

DISPUTES: Considering that terrorism, counter-terrorist policy, and policy options to counter political violence, have been for some legislatures, and especially the VIII legislature, a point of controversy between the main political parties in Spain, it seems appropriate to create a section where the most controversial episodes of the television portrayal of a campaign event like this attack can be observed.

¹ We have extracted all the news in prime time television news Spanish major national television (Antena 3, La Cuatro, La Sexta, Telecinco and TVE1, the latter being the main public TV channel) and the most important Andalusian regional chain (CSur1)

Analysis

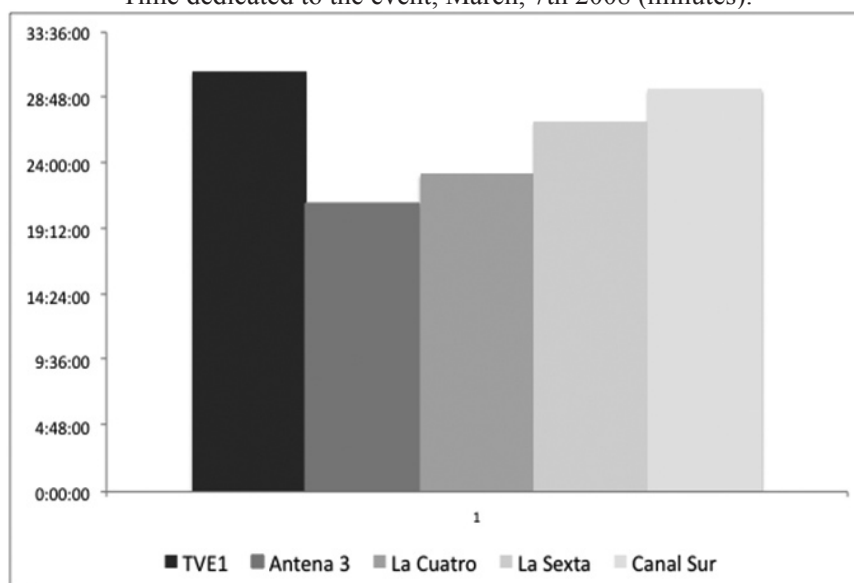
TIME:

An event so important as a terrorist attack during a general election campaign distorts the usual dynamics of newsmakers on television. Therefore, we start with the idea that this was the lead story in all the news broadcasters, as these became almost monographs on the subject.

Given the data, it is emphasised that public channels, like TVE1 and Canal Sur, were those which devoted more time to the event, almost reaching 30 minutes (practically all the news space), while, in the other channels, attention was somewhat smaller, but also very significant, being Antena 3 the channel which dedicated less time to this issue, but still with a record of more than 20 minutes.

Graph 1

Time dedicated to the event, March, 7th 2008 (minutes).



SOURCE: Own elaboration.

EVENTS.

There were some events considered very important by almost every TV channel:

Campaign suspension

On March 7th, 2008, most political parties suspended the scheduled campaign

events, with the exception of CiU (Convergència i Unió, the main Catalan nationalist party). This story appears in the news differently.

In TVE1, during the beginning of the newscast, the announcer says that “all parties have decided to suspend all actions and rallies this afternoon and evening”. However, Antena 3 portrays this issue in a completely different way to emphasise that a party is not going to stop its electoral campaign. In this media, it is emphasised that CiU does not add up to the decision of the other democratic parties, opting to “maintain its rally in Barcelona to make a protest against ETA”. They kept a minute of silence and reminded that CiU had been together with all political parties in the fight against terrorism.

La Cuatro highlights the suspending of all campaign activities by the parties, although when connects with Barcelona, it aims that “all the Catalan parties have cancelled the electoral campaign except CiU that has reconverted the meeting in Barcelona in a massive concentration against terrorism”. La Sexta ensures that upon hearing the news of the attack, all parties have suspended campaign events planned for that night, without specifying the exceptional case exemplified by CiU.

Telecinco news mention the campaign suspension, providing greater impact by connecting directly with the empty place where Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*, PSOE) was going to close the campaign: a building in Leganes (Madrid). Canal Sur essentially talks about the suspension of campaign acts alluding to the Andalusian case (it is a regional Andalusian channel) and aiming that events, in this community, “have been suspended or replaced by moments of silence”. In relation to the overall campaign, they only mention that was suspended by the major parties, without specifying more information and, therefore, not mentioning the decision of CiU.

Condemnation of ANV

One of the most important political aspects under analysis concerns the reaction of Basque Nationalist Action (*Acción Nacionalista Vasca*, ANV, considered close to ETA) from the point of view of the terrorist attack and its television coverage. TVE1 takes advantage of the direct connections with Mondragon (Basque Country) to point out that all of the municipal groups condemned the attack except the mayor and seven councillors from ANV. Near the end of the segment there is an informative statement by ANV spokeswoman in the city of Pamplona (Navarra), but the newscast referred to

the booing of the audience to his words and that ANV was the only party which did not condemn the attack.

Antena 3 provided more time to this particular point. It begins by noting that the mayor of Mondragon went to the hospital but socialist militants forced him to leave. Literally, the editor of this channel says “Batasuna rejects a press release condemning the murder referring to what happened in Arrasate”. The choice of the term “Batasuna” (former political branch of ETA) instead of the actual name “ANV”, denoted a key point of the editorial line. It also gives visibility to the full council of Pamplona for the condemnation of the attack where two councillors from ANV abstained and socialist and spokesmen from ANV faced each other. Next, it is noted that neither the mayors of Mondragón nor her seven councillors supported the statement. La Cuatro did not cover this particular aspect of the reactions, the only chain that does not talk of the position of ANV.

La Sexta also makes a direct connection in order to discuss the results of the full statement in the municipality of Mondragon, stressing that ANV governs with the support of *EB-Berdeake* (United Left-Greens), and that all local political groups, except ANV, condemned the attack. After the results of the plenary session, executed behind closed doors, this channel indicated a novelty: the speculation on the fact that the United Left raises the breaking of the pact of government, since ANV did not condemn the attack. Finally, it also included a fragment which relates to how the Socialists attempted to introduce a point in the municipal agenda to request the resignation of the mayor, which did not take place for reasons unknown. This channel dedicated more time on this particular issue than any of the analysed.

The narrative structure of Canal Sur is very similar to that posed by TVE1, offering a direct connection with Mondragón in order to comment the fact that the signature of the statement condemning the attack was not signed by everyone, and introducing some news: that the meeting of the municipal board was done behind closed doors.

Terrorism in campaigns

In almost all the networks, it can be observed a presentation of past terrorist episodes in electoral campaigns. However, this aspect is shown in a different way depending on the media network.

TVE1 presents a tour of more than 1’20” about terrorist attacks in the electoral history of Spain. In this case, it is noteworthy that not only mentions those committed

by the terrorist group ETA, but also mention that in the 2004 campaign Al-Qaeda carried out another attack in Madrid, calling it “the bloodiest”.

Antena3 rescues some of the more impressive and dramatic ETA attacks of the democratic period in Spain, including those occurring outside the campaign period, dedicating to it almost 2’30”. During this fragment they highlighted some aspects to frame the issue in a more dramatic form, for example, ensuring that ETA tried to kill “even during the declaration of a permanent ceasefire, and they got it”.

La Cuatro describes the history of the attacks from the first elections, in 1977. This channel introduces a new aspect in the development of terrorism on the eve of elections to the specific matter of kidnappings since, as noted, “ETA has been present in elections with attacks and kidnappings”. The news piece is particularly extensive, lasting 2’30”.

La Sexta also has his own vision on the history of ETA activity, probably driven by their editorial line. In this specific case it focuses only on the history of the attacks on Socialist politicians since 1984, when a few days before the Basque elections, terrorists murdered the socialist senator Enrique Casas. The magnitude of the news is quite small compared to the rest, around one minute.

Canal Sur focuses on the evolution of political bombings, during campaigns or not, since 1973, when ETA murdered Carrero Blanco (the alleged heir of the dictator Franco). They emphasise during the piece the meaning of the last cease-fire and its rupture. Of course, they give special consideration to attacks in Andalusia. Also, include an interesting fact: there are more than 700 ETA prisoners in Spanish and French prisons. The news is extremely long, when compared with that of the other channels: 2’40”.

Emotionality

Emotional news frames are usually a resource of the editors when they intend to surround the narration of facts with a special sensitivity, and to place the viewer in a state of shudder. News that by their nature are inherently dramatic, such as those relating to such events under analysis, are recurrently using these elements. All channels, although with varying degrees of intensity, handled these frames. The images of leaders crying, statements from relatives and even some dramatic background music were frequent during the analysis.

TVE1 humanises, as do other channels, the figure of Isaias Carrasco. It emphasises his private life, hobbies, and takes statements from people from his hometown. TVE1 also exposed dramatic frames with the images of family and socialist politicians crying. They also pick up the moment when President Zapatero, at a campaign rally in Malaga with another political leader, learns the news for the very first time.

Antena3 is more emotional than the previous channel. First, in the introduction of news, it described the attack in a crude form, adding the last conversation between the murdered and his wife and daughter, “you get out of this, he shook his head”. Antena3 also played old footage to chronicle the life of the murdered. This chain also takes the emotional images of Patxi Lopez (PSOE), visibly shaken, in the hospital, accompanied by a sign that read “Your friends cry”. As with the previous channel, Antena3 portrays the time when Zapatero is informed about the event, offering these images with a technical resource that increases the drama of the piece: slow motion. Like almost all the news, echoes the statement at a press conference when Enrique Buen (PSOE) asked for participating in the elections, completely shocked, ensuring that the results did not matter. Finally, the channel connects for nearly two minutes with the town of Morales de Toro (Zamora), describing a very emotional journey of his life, using statements from neighbors crying and talking about his human side.

Image 1. Enrique Buen’s statement. Csur1.



Canal Sur begins with the images of the murder and the touching reaction of Enrique Buen. This regional channel recovers, in the description of the facts, the contribution of a tremendously touching witness, where he explains how her daughter “full of blood” meets her father and shouts insults to the terrorists. It also uses the stirring images of

Patxi Lopez and Enrique Buen (again) crying, and uses images of the assassinated to reconstruct his history. Perhaps because it is an Andalusian channel, the form in which Manuel Chaves (Andalusian political leader, from PSOE) communicates the news to Zapatero is especially visible, showing not only the images of the moment but also the textual reproduction: “Jose Luis, a colleague has been shot, a socialist councillor of Mondragón, I believe that you have to go quickly”. Also, it describes how other leaders like Rajoy (Popular Party) and Llamazares (United Left) found out, something that other channels did not. The journalist is especially dramatic when closing the news, using affirmations like “Isaías Carrasco was a worker, father of three children, married, embraced to his wife and her daughter, died in the road who we have seen full of blood”.

Image 2. The moment President Zapatero knows about the murder. CSur1.



La Cuatro did not offer a dramatic coverage. Solely his anchorman, Iñaki Gabilondo, was somewhat dramatic when stating that the murdered was killed “in front of his daughters”, but he left this type of narration.

La Sexta is the channel which used the drama frame more. It used images in curl of the assassinated and some stirring iconographic resources as the spots of blood in the asphalt or the broken glasses of Isaías Carrasco on the highway. Like the previously described chains, it offered the moment in which Zapatero found out the murder (although he picks up the images of the press conference of Chaves where informs about the subject), the declarations of Buen and the images of the family and socialist companions in the hospital.

Image 3. Basque socialists cry for Isaías Carrasco. La Sexta.



Also, this channel makes something different, a special resource to surround dramatically the construction of the narration: is the only one that closes the programme combining background music, dramatic locutions of witnesses and fragments of video in slow motion, and so the emotion of this event is emphasised very intensely.

POLITICAL ASSESSMENTS.

The discussion on the **negotiation** with ETA as an effective formula for the eradication of terrorism in the country was one of the specific points where both main political parties, PSOE and PP, had more differences during the legislature. The position of PP was always the rejection to any dialog as a form of solution, aspect on which it was insisted always and that, in addition, was visible in many occasions during the electoral campaign, including the televised electoral debates. The attack that took the life of Isaías Carrasco and its coverage, stressed this controversial aspect of political confrontation, but not all television networks portrayed the issue with the same energy or even in the same way.

The main point used by news programmes to represent these differences was the joint statement made by all political parties represented in the *Congreso de los Diputados* (main Spanish Chamber), announced by José Blanco (PSOE). Although that statement was signed also by the Popular Party, all channels highlighted that PP lamented the absence of a refusal to negotiate a compromise to solve terrorism. All channels used Ignacio Asterloa's (PP) statement to dramatise the difference. TVE1, Antena 3 and La Cuatro offered the statement as *soundbite*, while La Sexta and Canal Sur only mentioned it through the anchorman. La Cuatro was probably the channel

which most emphasised the “isolation” of the PP in the statement, noting that “the PP was asked to do a separate statement,” and that the “political groups have criticised the position of PP and have sided with the government”. Also, the same channel brought the testimony of several spokesmen of the Chamber to highlight this argument through which represents the unity of all politicians against terrorism and the attitude of PP as reserved.

Another aspect that can be observed by watching the news is the constant appeal to **participation** in elections. Democratic parties sent a unanimous message to citizens to vote on Election Day, just the opposite of what the *nationalist* (i.e. the regionalist or independentist political parties) environment promoted, which called for abstention. In this sense, the channel that echoed this in a special way was La Sexta, closer to the ideological position of the Socialists, and constantly made use of the image of Isaias Carrasco voting in previous elections, as shown in Image 4. The most likely explanation relates directly to one of the rules of the Spanish electoral behaviour: the idea that socialist electoral victories are link to the mobilisation of citizens and, therefore, significant turnout rates. In this sense, Canal Sur also used a frame which invited participation as revulsion to terrorism on the part of voters.

Image 4. Isaías Carrasco voting. La Sexta.



The argument that was driving the news about the attack was highlighted by most Basque socialists: the best tribute to the assassinated is electoral participation, the votes, the victory of the democracy on terrorism.

One of the most impressive and touching resources that was displayed in almost all channels, was the use of the declarations of Miguel Buen, Secretary General of the PSE in Guipuzcoa, very affected, and asking for the vote for any democratic party,

assuring, heartbroken, the little he was concerned by the results of the elections. This call acquires a special relevance in the news. La Sexta even asks “all democrats to respond to ETA with their free and calm vote” the electoral day.

DISPUTES.

Campaign controversies are quite usual information that the mass media, visual and written, usually portrays in their editions, and are usually linked to a political purpose and editorial. Some authors emphasise the proliferation of this type of news as a result of the increasing process of negativity of political information during campaigns (Patterson, 1994; Jamieson, 1992; Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1997, among others).

The analysis of this news allows us to rescue some pieces where this dynamic is clear.

The isolation of ANV was object of some informative controversies that only some channels wanted to include in their editions, and that were reflected on different ways. TVE1 emphasises the narrative of the isolation of ANV, but it does not offer too many controverted pieces in this sense. At a certain time, when the journalist introduces the confrontation in the plenary session of the city council of Pamplona by the condemnation of the attack, Lorenzo Milá (anchorman) points out that “in the city council of Pamplona they booed the ANV spokeswoman”, offering some images of the plenary interventions.

Antena 3 also follows this same line emphasising the isolation. Just before displaying the confrontation between Socialists and ANV in the plenary session of the city council of Mondragón, the editor aimed that “the mayor of Mondragón – from ANV – also has gone to the hospital, but we do not see it because the Socialists affiliates forced him to leave”. This same point is included by Canal Sur, although maybe in a less blunt form, assuring than “also some councilmen of ANV have gone [to the hospital] but they had to leave by request of the companions of Isaías”.

There were also coverage of some events denoting **citizen outrage**. Antena 3 supported an idea reflecting the tiredness of Basques in relation to political violence and opened the news with images of citizens taking away the banners in Mondragón, supporting the imprisoned ETA members, which were in the balconies of the city hall, and replacing them with signs that read: “The anger of the neighbours”. La Sexta also leverages a direct connection with Mondragón to inform about the event, but without pictures.

Image 5. “citizen’s rage”. Antena 3.



One of the news pieces of Antena 3 expressed **reproaches to nationalism** by some citizens. This channel, after showing the press conference where Juan Jose Ibarretxe condemned the attack, included the shouts of a neighbour to the then *Lehendakari* (Basque President). The own journalist pointed out that around the hospital he had to listen some reproaches and the shouts of “Out of here! In what country do you live?”². Canal Sur also reflected this fact, although without including specific footage, assuring that “to the hospital have also approached members of other political formations as Maria San Gil [PP] or *Lehendakari* Ibarretxe, who has been booed on arrival”.

Image 6. Electoral meeting, Basque Nationalist Party. The slogan is: I live in Euskadi [Basque Country], where do you live?



² “¿Y tú dónde vives?” *In what country do you live?* Was part of the electoral slogan of the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) in 2008.

Although the behaviour of the politicians generally was of solidarity with the family of the victim and of union against terrorists, La Sexta displays some anecdotal episodes that reflected the **confrontation between PSOE and PP** in relation to the Basque conflict and the antiterrorist policy. When this channel displayed the arrival of politicians to the hospital, adds also a fragment where it depicts a Maria San Gil (PP) criticised by his position against political violence: The journalist said: “Patxi Lopez [PSOE] is also visibly moved. Soon it begins to come more visits to give the condolence to the colleagues and friends of Isaías (...). Ibarretxe appears very affected, just like some leaders of the Basque PP, among them Maria San Gil”. Just at the end of this affirmation, the piece included background sounds that accompanied the image by this member of PP leaving the hospital, a citizen shouting to him: “Let’s see if we negotiate with ETA now, now tell him, tell him. Calamity!”. Also, this channel included the words of the shout in a label, although the journalist did not comment on the fact. Finally, the journalist closed saying that “the exit from the hospital triggered moments of tension”.

Image 7. “Let’s see if we negotiate with ETA now, now tell him, tell him. Calamity!” La Sexta



La Sexta also reported an event what caused great discomfort within socialists: Rajoy’s (PP national leader) behaviour regarding his visit to Mondragon to accompany the family, of which PSOE was not informed in advance. This news was labelled as follows: „Rajoy has not reported his visit either to the government or the PSE [Socialist Party in the Basque Country]”. It was the only network which reported on this specific fact.

Image 8. “Rajoy did not inform about his visit to the Government or to PSOE”



Nevertheless, no channel did comment on an incident on the same day between the General Secretary of the Basque Socialists, and current *Lehendakari* at that time, Patxi Lopez, and the PP candidate for the presidency of Spain, Mariano Rajoy. As some (Malaina, 8.03.2008) newspapers reported, during the celebration of the funeral, Lopez reproached Rajoy for some statement made by the later during a televised electoral debate a few days before, accusing the Socialists of betraying the victims of terrorism.

Conclusions

The coverage of a terrorist attack is always very complex. If in addition this event takes place during an electoral campaign, the complication multiplies by the diversity of intervening variables, the magnitude of the news, and by the great politicisation that comes with **terrorism as an issue** of the electoral campaign in 2008 in Spain.

This analysis portrays a magnificent example of editorial differences in the presentation of facts, the exhibition of the reactions and the assessment of the murder on the part of the more significant political actors.

It is interesting to see how all of the analysed media used similar frames, which can be interpreted as a similar behaviour linked to journalist's routines (especially those frames based on human drama); but, at the same time, used them to stress, occasionally, their support or condemnation of some political option or party. In this way, we can

assess that they follow the polarised pluralist model. However, this polarisation had to be found in different ways, some of them not easy to grasp, especially with quantitative content analysis tools: the use of images from different angles is subtle, but very meaningful. Maybe the best example was given by the Andalusian regional channel, Csur1. In their coverage of the event they always used images where the Andalusian president was visible. No other channel did the same. That is why the use of qualitative methods fits this kind of research much better. Other examples can be found analysing the wording, the order of the images, the sources cited in the news, etc.

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Abstract

This paper presents the television coverage of a terrorist attack during the 2008 election campaign in Spain. The starting point is that in media systems known as polarised pluralist, issues are usually framed through the lenses of electoral competition, portrayed from the point of view of political parties. Analysis shows that even in the

case of important issues such as terrorism, the dynamics of polarised pluralism bias its coverage, offering different versions of events to citizens.

Keywords: Coalition governments; Spain; Spatial analysis; non-state-wide parties; minority governments; parliamentary system; bargaining

Obraz terroryzmu w hiszpańskiej telewizji podczas kampanii wyborczej 2008 roku: przykład spolaryzowanego pluralizmu?

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł prezentuje relacje telewizyjne po ataku terrorystycznym, który miał miejsce podczas kampanii wyborczej w Hiszpanii w 2008 roku. Punktem wyjścia jest stwierdzenie, że w systemach medialnych określanych jako „spolaryzowany pluralizm” poszczególne tematy ujmowane są przez media w ramy konkurencji wyborczej i przedstawiane z perspektywy stanowisk poszczególnych partii politycznych. Analiza pokazuje, że nawet w przypadku kwestii wyjątkowo istotnych, takich jak terroryzm, dynamika spolaryzowanego pluralizmu wykrzywia przekaz w taki sposób, iż do odbiorców kierowane są odmienne wersje wydarzeń.

Słowa kluczowe: koalicja rządząca; Hiszpania; analiza przestrzenna; partie regionalne; rząd mniejszościowy; system parlamentarny; negocjacje